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CHINCHILLA RABBITS *for* FOOD AND FUR

LEAFLET No. 22

MANY INQUIRIES are received by the Department of Agriculture regarding the Chinchilla rabbit, the specific requests being for an accurate description of the breed and for information concerning the food and fur value, and how Chinchillas compare with other breeds and varieties of rabbits raised for commercial purposes. This leaflet has been prepared to furnish this and related information under the following headings:

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Other publications on feeding and housing rabbits and utilizing their skins may be procured by addressing a request to the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

Washington, D. C. May, 1928

This leaflet is a contribution from the
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CHINCHILLA RABBITS FOR FOOD AND FUR

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CHINCHILLA RABBITS are a comparatively new breed, especially in the United States. They first appeared in France, later were introduced into England, and about 1918 were brought to North America. Many theories have been advanced as to their origin. The domestic rabbits now being produced for food and fur purposes came from the European hare (genus Lepus). Some breeders maintain that the Chinchilla rabbit originated by crossing the French Silver (Champagne d'Argent) with the so-called Belgian hare, combining

Origin and Popularity

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Fig. 1.—Chinchilla buck; weight 6 pounds. A well-furred animal of fine color but lacking in size, which is a most essential requirement for meat production. Such a buck can sometimes be used to advantage in breeding if mated to a large doe of proper type

the silvery-blue color of the Silver with the distinct color rings found in the underfur of the Belgian. Others consider the Chinchilla rabbit a distinct breed. Still others are of the opinion that it is merely a sport from an established breed. Despite the many interesting accounts that have been published regarding the early history of the Chinchilla rabbit, there is nothing definite to substantiate any of the various theories advanced as to its origin.

The Chinchilla rabbit gets its name presumably from its color resemblance to the wild chinchilla (*Chinchilla lanigera*) of South America. That is a small rodent with a fine fur that has long had a

high value in commerce. Persons unfamiliar with rabbit raising often confuse the two animals, which are much alike in color but there the similarity ends.

The Chinchilla rabbit has been widely exploited as a fur producer, because of the striking color pattern of the pelt in its natural state. This is both attractive for women's garments and appropriate for trimmings. It is doubtful whether any other breed, with the possible exception of the Belgian hare, has been more persistently promoted. As a result it has gained rapidly in popularity, until to-day it is known in every section of the United States where domestic rabbits are bred. Its attractive colored pelt is the most outstanding feature. The breed is still in the early stages of development. To maintain its popularity and to satisfy the demands of commercial breeders, more attention should be given to developing it as a meat producer.

Economic Value

The Chinchilla, perhaps more than any other breed of rabbit, has been widely heralded as a "fur rabbit," and many exaggerated and misleading statements have been made regarding the value of its fur and the large profits to be derived from the sale of the pelts. This has had a tendency to create a false impression and has led many to invest large sums in breeding stock, with the expectation of a rich reward, only to learn from hard experience that the claims made were exaggerated. All breeds of domestic rabbits except the Angora produce fur and may properly be termed "fur rabbits." The term applies to no particular breed or variety. The color of the pelt of the Chinchilla rabbit is especially attractive and this is responsible in large measure for the widespread popularity of the breed. The price paid for skins by the large fur buyers, however, is not sufficient to justify many of the assertions that have been made or to enable one to engage in breeding these rabbits for their fur alone and make a satisfactory profit. As with all domestic rabbits, Chinchillas must be bred for both meat and fur to combine the returns from the two commodities and thus derive the maximum profit on the labor and capital invested.

Food and Fur Qualities

The flesh of the Chinchilla rabbit is firm, fine grained, and palatable. As a breed the animal is fine in bone and has rather a small head and ears, a characteristic that tends to reduce the percentage of waste in dressing for the table. The fur is about 1½ inches long and on some animals is very dense, but usually the quality or texture of Chinchilla-rabbit fur is little different from that of the New Zealand, the Flemish, or other popular breeds. The color, however, with its soft natural tones, is distinctive and, for rabbits, unusual. The markings are unique and difficult to imitate successfully, so that they make the fur attractive for garments and trimmings and for other uses of the fur trade. Although these characteristics are decidedly advantageous in many ways, they are nevertheless inadequate to command or justify the high values attributed either to Chinchilla rabbits or to their pelts as produced at the present time. The small size of the animal and the variation in the color of the fur make breeding improvements necessary if advanced prices are to be realized.

A LARGE rabbit skin, other things being equal, is more valuable than a small one, and a large rabbit when sold for food or as a breeder of market stock will naturally command a higher price than one with a small frame and considerably less flesh. The ideal commercial rabbit should weigh 9 or 10 pounds at maturity. An animal of this size not only furnishes a pelt satisfactory for use in the fur trade, but provides the popular-sized carcass for roasting; it will also produce a 4-pound rabbit (2 pounds dressed) at 8 weeks of age, this being the fryer size and the weight demanded in the high-class markets. A larger rabbit is usually too coarse and heavy in bone, and a smaller one does not have sufficient meat.

Importance of Size

The average Chinchilla rabbit as bred to-day weighs about 6 pounds. (Figs. 1 and 2.) Mature animals of this weight are less valuable for the table than those weighing 10 pounds, and because of

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FIG. 2.—Chinchilla doe; weight 6½ pounds. A trim, clean-cut rabbit with good color and quality of fur but lacking in size. Such an animal makes an attractive appearance in the showroom but is unprofitable for commercial purposes

lack of size will not produce 4-pound youngsters at 8 weeks of age. To attain such weight, the young must be kept for a considerably longer period, and this increases the cost of production. Thus, the 6-pound Chinchilla rabbit advocated by fanciers is less profitable for commercial purposes than some of the larger utility breeds.

As a breed the Chinchilla rabbit possesses all the inherent qualities of the ideal utility rabbit, but these qualities must be developed in order to keep pace with the growing demand for a better product. What is needed is larger Chinchillas. Greater size of frame must be developed if the required weight of flesh is to be added, and the size and color of the pelt must be improved if its value as fur is to be increased. Progressive breeders realize this and are making earnest efforts to develop larger animals. Already some bucks and does of fine color have been produced weighing 9 or 10 pounds, illustrating what can be done by careful breeding and feeding. (Fig. 3.)

Breeding

Chinchilla rabbits may be raised successfully in almost any section of the United States or Canada. They respond rapidly to selective breeding, but thus far Americans have been more concerned in producing a sufficient number of animals to meet the demand than in attempting to improve the commercial value of the breed. Too little consideration has been given to the size of the animal, the color of the fur, and other practical qualities, and too much attention has been paid to fancy or showroom requirements, such as color of eyes, feet, and toenails, which are only subtle niceties that please the eye of the fancier but add nothing to the value of meat or fur.

Some difference of opinion exists as to whether there is a direct relation between the color of eyes and toenails and the color of the pelt. Some breeders believe that brown eyes and brown toenails are arbitrary standards that should be abolished. Experience has shown that Chinchilla rabbits with blue eyes and light toenails often have the finest-colored pelts, while animals with brown or other dark-colored eyes and toenails have a tendency to show a rusty or brownish cast in the surface of the fur. The color pigments of the eyes, toenails, and fur are closely coordinated, but the extent of this relationship is yet to be determined by scientific breeding experiments. Until these important factors are definitely known, it seems advisable for breeders to disregard the color of eyes, feet, and toenails and to select their breeding animals principally for size, type, and color of fur. The eye, foot, and toe colors have no commercial significance, and by disregarding for the present these characters in mating, more rapid progress can be made in perfecting others that are more important.

Some rabbit raisers are increasing the size of the Chinchilla rabbit by crossbreeding with the Flemish Giant or with some other large breed or variety. The young are then bred together, and rabbits produced from matings of this kind frequently weigh 12 pounds or more each at maturity. These cross breeds are sometimes called Chinchilla Giants, and a few breeders are attempting to feature them as a separate variety. This practice of introducing foreign blood to increase size is detrimental to the development of the true Chinchilla rabbit and may well be discouraged.

The true Chinchilla rabbit is not a Giant either in size or in type, and a name that suggests giant characteristics is misleading. Furthermore, it is inadvisable to foster and maintain a large and a small type rabbit (two separate varieties of the same color and conformation) within the same breed. To do so makes confusion and dissatisfaction among purchasers of stock, and results in a lack of uniformity in shipments of carcasses and skins, thus lowering their market value. More rapid progress can be made by producers and larger returns realized by fostering one breed under the accepted name "Chinchilla" rather than by creating separate varieties with inappropriate titles.

Crossbred Chinchilla rabbits have been produced in some instances with almost ideal color and conformation and weighing 10 pounds or more at maturity. These are usually the result of carefully planned matings based on several generations of selective pedigree breeding and are a tribute to the skill of the breeder. Rabbits of this kind bred to the smaller Chinchillas will increase materially the size of the offspring. Mated to their own kind they will produce young

weighing 10 pounds at maturity, which is the goal of the progressive Chinchilla breeder. Though size may be obtained more quickly by crossbreeding with larger varieties, undesirable characters, such as coarser bone and larger head, are likewise transmitted. These crossbred Chinchillas also frequently lose the clear, sharp color and well-defined ticking in the fur that is so desirable. Time, patience, and skill on the part of the breeder are required to overcome these defects.

It is not advisable, therefore, for persons unfamiliar with the laws of heredity, and the manner in which characters of animals are transmitted from generation to generation, to attempt experimental or indiscriminate crossbreeding. It is better to select and mate within the breed. Rapid progress can be made by mating the largest and best-colored animals generation after generation and exercising

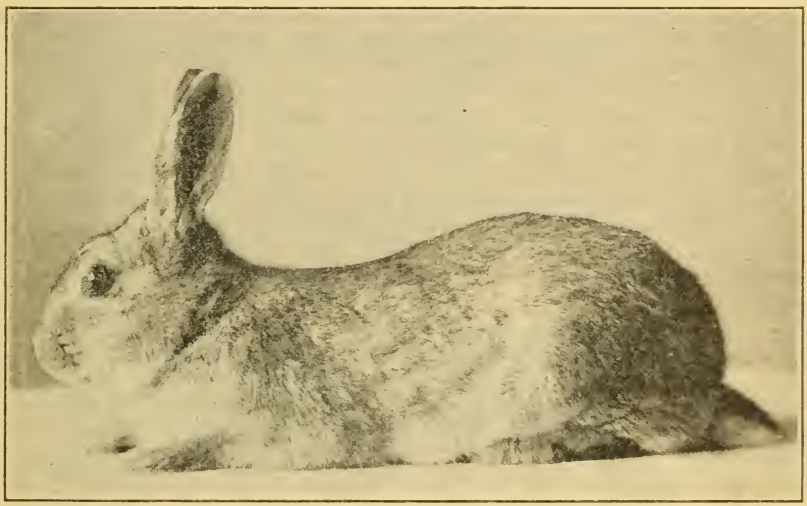

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FIG. 3.—Chinchilla doe; weight 10 pounds. A large, blocky, heavy-bodied animal of good proportions, broad, well-developed hind quarters, and good color and quality of fur. A doe of this kind will produce young weighing 4 pounds each at 8 weeks of age, which will have the desirable combination of food and fur qualities

proper care and attention in developing the young. Vigor and vitality in breeding animals are very important factors. Furthermore, where effort is being made to increase the size of the breed, only such does should be used as are known to give a supply of milk sufficient to nourish the young properly.

The doe should be bred only three times a year, instead of four or five as is the general practice and should be allowed to raise only four or five young to a litter. Leave the young with the doe, until they are 8 weeks of age. As soon as they are old enough to eat grain and green food, a plentiful supply should be furnished, for young rabbits must be well nourished from the day they are born if they are to develop rapidly and attain more than average size. Select only the largest and most promising from each litter for future breeding purposes, and do not permit them to breed until 7 or 8 months old.

THE IDEAL Chinchilla rabbit is one that will conform to certain standards. Both bucks and does should be of medium size, stocky, and well proportioned. Individuals are classed, by age, as seniors and juniors. Senior bucks should weigh 9 pounds; senior does, 10; junior bucks, 7; and junior does, 8. Animals nearest these weights, other things being equal, should be given preference. The head should be rather small, the neck short, the shoulders tight to the body, and the thighs large and broad, the general effect being a gradual taper from rear to front. The thighs should be covered with an abundance of firm, thick flesh. The ears should be thin, rounded at the ends, carried erect, and not more than 5 inches long. The dewlap, or pendulous skin under the throat, should be comparatively small. The belly should be of medium fullness but free from any potted appearance, except in the case of pregnant or nursing does.

Standard Requirements

The fur should be a rich, even, uniform shade of soft, bluish gray, free from any brown or rusty tinge, and interspersed with long hairs (commonly called guard hairs) tipped with jet black and so arranged as to give a wavy effect. The chest and flanks may be a lighter shade, but an even, harmonious blending of color in all sections is desirable. The under-fur at the base should be slate blue and the intermediate color ashy gray, merging into pearl gray, with black and white at the ends of the hairs. The belly should be bluish white on the surface, and the under color should be a deep, rich blue.

The following defects are called disqualifications for judging purposes, and an animal having one or more of them can not win a prize in the showroom:

Sickness or disease.
Lack of distinctive type.
Lopped ears.
Blindness in one or both eyes.
Crooked legs or feet, bowed legs, or knocked knees.
Crooked back, crooked neck, or other body deformity.
Wry, screw, or side-carried tail.
A tail bobbed or otherwise mutilated.
White, brown, smut, or other foreign-colored streak or patch on head, feet, or other part of body.
Too light color or absence of black-tipped guard hairs.
Weight less than 6 or more than 11 pounds in mature rabbits.

THE CHINCHILLA is a valuable addition to the domestic-rabbit family and offers unusual possibilities to persons who will develop its good qualities. The future of the breed, however, and its ultimate popularity depend solely on its economic value as a meat and fur producer. For this reason it is important that breeders pay special attention to commercial rather than fancy qualities. Every effort should be made to increase the size of the breed (to 9 pounds for bucks and to 10 for does) and to improve the color and texture of the fur, so that it may become a profitable meat producer with a pelt of greater value to the fur trade.

Future Development

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